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ABSTRACT

This report describes a program for increasing reading motivation and comprehension. The targeted population consisted of two heterogeneous groups of fourth grade students who attended a public school located in a northwest suburb of a large metropolitan area. The students' lack of motivation and poor comprehension skills were documented by low reading scores and teacher observations. Analysis of probable cause data revealed that students exhibited a lack of interest in reading and a lack of appropriate reading skills and strategies. Additionally, changing demographics in the community contributed to the problem. A review of published solution strategies combined with an analysis of the problem setting resulted in the selection of literature discussions to be implemented as an ongoing instructional strategy before, during, and after reading. Post intervention data indicated an increase in student motivation to read and improved comprehension. (Contains 20 references, 1 table, and 16 figures of data. Appendixes contain survey instruments and a reading inventory.) (Author/RS)

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STUDY OF READING COMPREHENSION AND STUDENT ENJOYMENT OF READING AS RELATED TO LITERATURE DISCUSSIONS

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An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

Saint Xavier University & IRI/Skylight
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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to our families in appreciation of the patience, understanding, and support they have given us.

ABSTRACT

This report describes a program for increasing reading motivation and comprehension. The targeted population consisted of two heterogeneous groups of fourth grade students who attended a public school located in a Northwest suburb of a large metropolitan area. The students' lack of motivation and poor comprehension skills were documented by low reading scores and teacher observations.

Analysis of probable causes revealed that students exhibited a lack of interest in reading and a lack of appropriate reading skills and strategies. Additionally, changing demographics in the community have contributed to this problem.

A review of published solution strategies combined with an analysis of the problem setting, resulted in the selection of literature discussions to be implemented as an ongoing instructional strategy before, during and after reading.

Post intervention data indicated an increase in student motivation to read and improved comprehension.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

The students of the targeted fourth grade classes exhibit signs of poor reading comprehension and a lack of interest in reading for enjoyment. Evidence for the existence of these problems in the majority of the target group include: low IGAP reading scores, information gathered from parent and student surveys, teacher observation and poor performance on comprehension tests.

Immediate Problem Context

This study has been conducted in a modern, air-conditioned, kindergarten through fifth grade building which has all the essential amenities. The current enrollment is 385 students. Of those students, 77.4% are White, 3.4% are Black, 14.3% are Hispanic, 4.4% are Asian or Pacific Islander, and 0.5% are Native American. While these figures loosely parallel the make up of the targeted classrooms, (which consist of 44 students, 1 is black, 2 are Asian, 7 are Hispanic and the remaining 34 are white) they are in sharp contrast with the rest of the school district. These 44 students have been taken from two fourth grade classes. Each of the two classrooms are made up of students functioning at different levels and together include five learning-disabled children and three English as a Second Language students.

Site A contains 3.9% low income students and 9.1% Limited-English-proficient students. Attendance at this site is high, 95.1%, which compliments a

chronic truancy rate of 0.0%. These figures compare favorably to the state percentages, and closely resemble the district figures. The average class size for Site A is 24 students. This information provides a glimpse into the student population.

Of the 100 full-time teachers currently employed by District X, 95.9% are White and 4.1% are Hispanic. Forty-eight percent of the teaching staff currently hold a master's degree. The average teaching salary earned in District X is $40,000 per year. The average number of years teaching experience is 12.9.

The average years of teaching experience is an area where district figures do not parallel those of Site A. Of the 16 teachers who are currently employed there, 8 teachers have less than 3 years of experience. Six of the remaining 8 teachers provide at least 20 years of experience, leaving only 2 teachers to bridge the gap. The average number of years taught at the school site is 9. This number seems misleading. Another factor that may be contributing to the illusion is that there is such a young staff and the fact that 8 of the 16 teachers are new to the district and do not have tenure.

Unresolved building issues seemed to have caused this unusually high mobility rate among the teaching staff at Site A. Morale in the district is low because of lost programs, a pay freeze, and a lack of respect between administration and the staff.

The reading program used by teachers at Site A consists of a combination of whole language and basal instruction. Read-alouds and independent daily reading add another dimension to the program. Some components of the whole language instruction are: teaching higher level thinking skills, strategic reading, literature circles, journal reflections, class discussions, and word walls. The basal instruction reflects the traditional skills of decoding and basic comprehension practice.

The Surrounding Community

The community that makes up District X encompasses an area of suburban homes and rental properties ranging in value from $100,000 to $550,000. This vast range of housing is reflective of the wide variety of occupations held by community members. The community is a centrally located suburb of a large metropolitan area that is situated in close proximity to several large industrial parks and a major airport. These factors contribute to the diversity of the work force which ranges from unskilled laborers to high-powered executives.

Hot topics in the district at this time are the changing curriculum, contract negotiations and the possibility of a strike, the flurry of new faces - as the staff seems to be constantly changing, and the discipline problems currently festering. These problems have been a factor in lowering teacher moral.

District X is comprised of four elementary schools and one middle school. The district serves 2,017 students, 10.3% of whom come from low-income households. Because District X is not a unit district, it has no official connection with the local high school; however, some wonderful partnerships have been formed between the primary and secondary schools. In the elementary district, $6,271 is spent on each student annually. This figure is surprisingly high as District X has not had a successful school referendum since 1968. In the past three years, all attempts to pass the referendum have failed. As a result, all programs for gifted students, as well as gym, art and music classes were cut from the elementary schools. After operating in this fashion for the entire 1995 -1996 school year, no gains were made at the polling places. And so the 1996 school year also began in a similar fashion.

Thanks to a village initiative, several improvements have been implemented in the schools this year. The initiative is comprised of the village's five taxing

bodies (the library, the park district, the high school, District X, and the local government) coming together to support the community by providing funding. Through this plan, District X was able to return a small portion of the teaching positions that had been cut in 1995. Physical Education has been returned to the elementary schools on a limited basis. In addition, the students now receive Spanish instruction, and they benefit from the use of an interactive information system.

National Context of the Problem

"The ability to read and understand is essential to each citizen's informed and full participation in a democratic society" (NAEP Reading Assessment, 1994, p. 2). Therefore, comprehension is essential in helping to preserve the democratic system we value. Providing students with the ability to read and understand is generally equated with American education. If it is the job of our educational system to insure this goal, comprehension must be a priority.

Presently, the issue of reading comprehension has become a high priority because of a nationwide decline in reading scores. Headlines reporting a reading crisis are prevalent at newsstands and in professional journals. Among the eye-catching titles are: "District Y Reading Scores Drop, State Charts 5-Year Course to Improve Reading Scores, State Pushes to Reverse Reading Decline, and Educators at a Loss Over Slipping Reading Scores." In one article, four local school districts report dropping reading scores. Also reflected in a poll given to students was a general lack of interest in reading. Two-thirds of the student body reported that they hardly ever read, and 22 % said they never read (Heitz, 1997, p. 2). Another source states, "Scores on the state-mandated battery of tests have dropped precipitously again, an ominous trend that seems to suggest that there is a crisis in reading in the state" (Martinez & Bils, 1997, p. 5). The problem with falling reading comprehension is so wide spread, the State Superintendent is quoted as saying, "We

have a national crisis in reading. The decline in reading is real and is of a magnitude that we must be concerned" (Bils, 1997, p. 7). The superintendent of schools in the largest metropolitan city in this state says there is a very obvious reading emergency in the country and in this state (Bils, 1997). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (1994) states several key points:

1. The percentage of students who reached the proficient level in reading declined from 1992 to 1994.

2. Between 1992 and 1994, the average reading proficiencies of fourth graders declined in eight states: California, Delaware, Louisiana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Virginia.

3. Also in 1994, only 30% of the students attained the Proficient level in reading, and a mere 3 to 7% attained the Advanced level.

4. Across the nation there were declines in average reading proficiency from 1992 to 1994.

5. In 1994, students in the Northeast, Central, and West regions displayed lower average reading proficiencies that their 1992 counterparts.

For all of the above reasons the nation is currently in the midst of a reading crisis.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

In order to document reading problems of low comprehension and poor student motivation, several forms of data were collected. Inadequate comprehension was clearly indicated by falling Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP) scores, failing scores (average of 56%) on a basic comprehension test (Silver Burdett and Ginn level 10 placement test, 1989) administered to all students in September, 1997, responses from parent and student surveys (Appendix A and B), and teacher observations. The results of parent and student surveys, and teacher observations were used to document that student motivation in reading could be improved.

Illinois Goal Assessment Program

The need for improved reading comprehension was documented by reading scores which showed a steady decline over the last three years. At the third grade level, an average of 54 students completed the IGAP assessment in 1995, 1996, and 1997. As displayed in Figure 1, the largest drop occurred between 1995 and 1996 when scores plummeted 30 points. This declining pattern continued the following year by dropping an additional 22 points. When compared to relatively stable state scores it is easy to recognize this drastic decline.

Another concern currently being debated at site A is the fact that in 1995, the school's average reading score was a soaring 293 compared to a state average of only 247. This has become such a grave issue because current reading scores have

reached an all time low of 241 which is below the state average. Administrators, teachers and parents alike do not feel these scores are acceptable for a middle class suburban community.

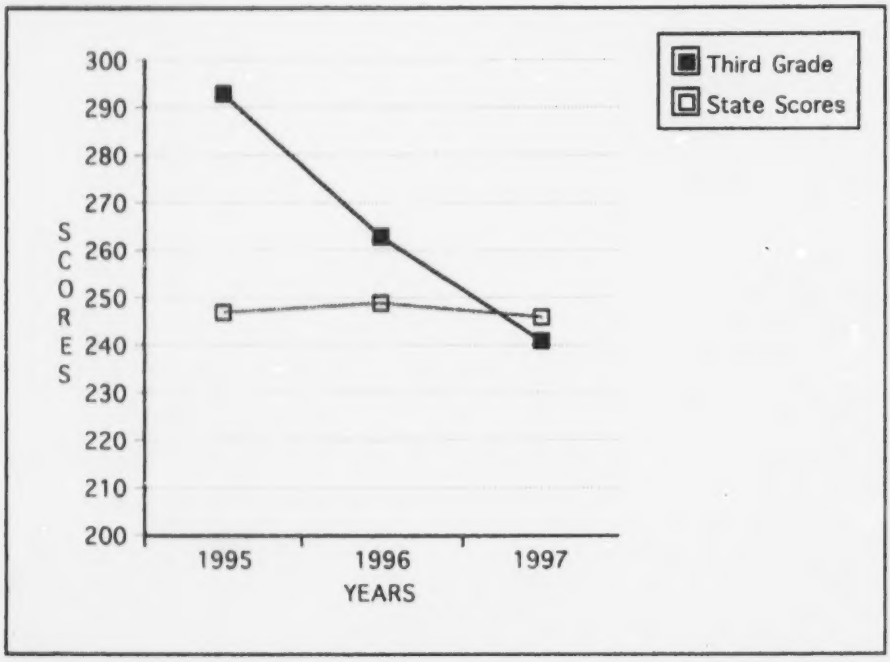

Figure 1. IGAP Scores. Student performance at Site A declined significantly between 1995 and 1997, while state scores remained stable. Points plotted on the above graph represent the average scores.

The purpose of the reading IGAP is to assess reading comprehension. Based on the scores attained by the students at site A, the connection can be made that students need to raise their comprehension levels. Additional tests were administered to further document the need for addressing this issue.

Basic Comprehension Test

Figure 2 shows the results of the basic comprehension test that was administered in September, 1997. The comprehension test was on a short test consisting of 15 questions. The text and questions were from an entry-level fourth grade basal reader.

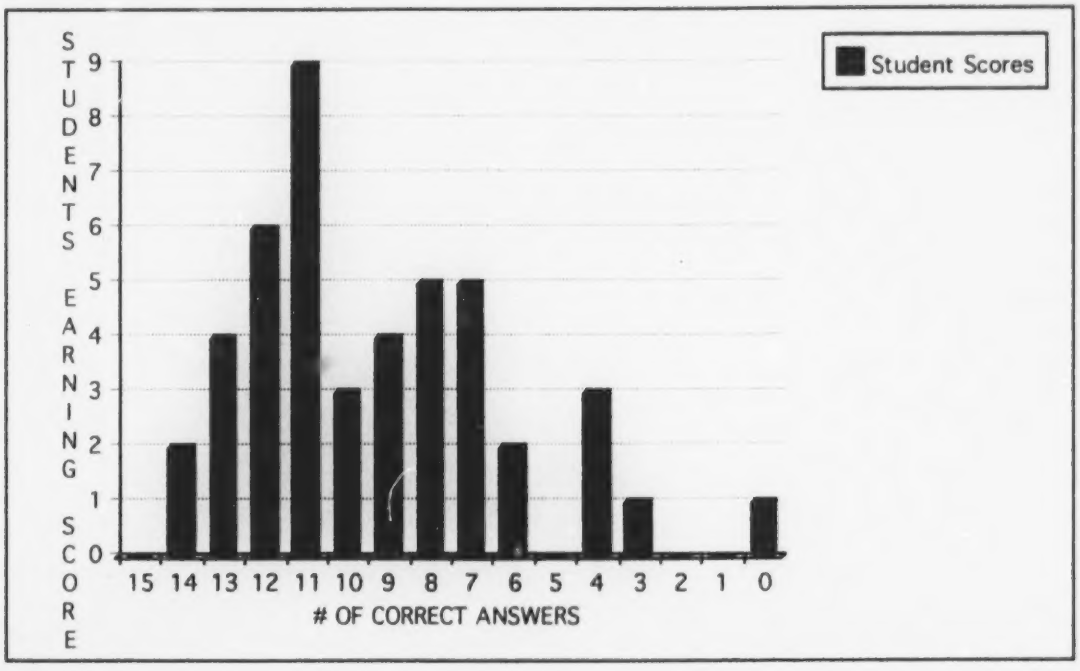

Figure 2. September, 1997 Comprehension Test. Scores of less than 11 correct answers represent lower than 70% achievement.

When studying the graph it is evident that none of the students earned a perfect score. Six of the 47 students who took the test earned a score of 87% or better. Fifteen of the 47 students passed with at least a 70%, the remaining 26 students scored 67% or less. This shows a significant problem with reading comprehension. In addition to inadequate comprehension, poor student motivation is also a focus of this research. Motivation was measured through parent and student surveys.

Parent and Student Surveys

In an effort to prove that there is an apathetic attitude toward reading among the students at site A, parent and student surveys were administered. All 44 students from two fourth grade classes at site A completed a survey which asked them to respond to questions about their attitude toward reading. When asked how

they felt about reading instead of playing, 22.7% of the students responded, "No way!," 63.6% of the students responded, "Okay, if I have to," and the remaining 13.7% of the students responded, "Sure, I'll do it." These types of responses were reiterated when students were asked how they felt about reading text books. When asked how they felt about getting a book for a gift, 2.3% of the students responded, "No way!," 27.2% of the students said, "Okay, if I have to," and the remaining 70.5% of the students responded, "All right, thanks!" These types of responses were reiterated when students were asked how they felt when they go to the library to check out a book. Another question students were asked was how they felt about spending free time in school reading. To this question student responses were as follows: 4.6% of the students said, "No way!," 47.7% of the students said, "Okay, if I have to," and the remaining 47.7 % students responded, "Hurrah!" The final question on the survey was reading made the students feel... To this question, 4.6% of the students said, "Horrible," 34.0% of the students said, "Okay, I guess," and the remaining 61.4% of the students said, "Great!"

The second measure of students' apathetic attitude in reading was a survey completed by the parents. Each student was asked to have one parent complete the survey. Of the 44 surveys that were distributed, all were returned. Some of the questions were designed to assess comprehension and others focused on reading attitudes. The first question about reading attitudes asked if their child is motivated to read. Twenty-seven and three tenths percent of the parents responded that their child was highly motivated to read, 50.0% of the parents responded that their child was somewhat motivated to read and the remaining 13.7% of the parents responded that their children were not motivated to read at all. The second question asked if their child enjoys being read to. Thirty-four percent of the parents responded that their child enjoyed being read to a great deal, 50.0% of the parents responded that

ed that their child did not enjoy being read to at all. The results of the student and parent surveys showed a slightly favorable attitude toward reading. This caused the researchers some concern because classroom observations told a different story.

Teacher Observations / Informal Survey

Some of the behaviors observed during the regular school day were off-task behavior during reading activities, students who perused books during SSR instead of reading them, lack of interest in choosing reading as a free time activity, and blatant whining during SSR. It became clear that additional data led to more valid results. On a second student survey given in October, it was evident that this time the students responses more closely resembled the observations made by the classroom teachers. Note that questions on the September and October surveys were the same. The September survey was in the form of a written questionnaire whereas the October survey presented the questions as an activity. For a direct comparison of the September and October student survey results see Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of Student Responses to Attitude Survey

Survey Item	September			October		
Reading makes me feel...	27	15	2	8	4	32
How do you feel about reading instead of playing?	6	28	10	8	10	26
How do you feel about reading text books?	8	28	8	8	10	26
When I get a book for a gift I feel...	31	12	1	4	6	34
How do you feel when you go to the library?	32	10	2	14	8	22
How do you feel about spending free time in school reading?	21	21	2	4	10	30

Note. The figures in Table 1 are expressed in number of student responses, not as percentages. September and October survey results are clearly different.

When responding to the more informal survey given in October, it was clear that the students themselves refuted the results of the September surveys. Their responses to the October surveys more accurately resembled the behaviors exhibited in the classroom. Several reasons came to mind as to why the survey results were vastly different. Upon closer examination it was determined that all of the possible reasons seemed to relate to the fact that students were more comfortable with their teacher. As the year progressed students may have been less concerned with spoiling their teachers' first impression of them, and may have revealed their true feelings about reading.

As noted earlier, the purpose of IGAP testing is to assess comprehension. Thus, the trend in declining IGAP scores coupled with an abundance of failing scores on basic comprehension tests provide strong evidence that the students in District X do not consistently apply essential comprehension skills. In addition to the problem of insufficient comprehension, a general lack of motivation was observed. Observation was gathered from multiple perspectives. The parent survey provided insight into the students reading behaviors at home. Student surveys provided first-hand insight into the mind of the reader. Finally, teacher observation provided professional insight into reading behaviors. Taking into consideration three different perspectives resulted in a well rounded view of the readers. The results of parent and student surveys as well as teacher observations clearly indicate that students are not intrinsically motivated to read. There are a number of causes for this problem.

Probable Causes

The researchers propose the following as the on-site causes for the problem of inadequate comprehension and apathetic attitudes toward reading: changing demographics, not enough time devoted to reading instruction, lack of teacher

training/effectiveness, and lack of skills and strategies known to or used by students. A review of the literature suggests several probable causes for reduced reading comprehension. Some of the main causes are: changing demographics, time, and lack of teacher training/effectiveness. Not surprisingly, these were some of the same suspected causes attributed to the problems at site A.

Changing Demographics

Changing demographic is an issue nation-wide. Canterford (1991) discussed the need for modified curriculum frameworks that would meet the needs of all students in our changing society.

Changing demographics is also an issue in District X. While it is true that the entire district has been effected by changing populations, at the present time site A is experiencing a greater rate of change than what was typical in past years. This is because of a new student distribution policy made by the administration. Data supporting this statement is clearly shown in the school report card which states that in 1995, site A had a mobility rate of 15.7% and only 1.3% of the population was low income. These figures can be compared to a 1997 mobility rate of 26.2% and an increase to 6.1% of low income families. Unfortunately, quite often students from low income families are left with little support at home and therefore require additional support in school, which translates to more teacher time needed by the student.

Time

The shortage of time is a burden that all teachers experience. In a study of exemplary reading programs in Illinois public schools, Foertsch (1997) discusses what an important factor time is in student learning. She notes that American schools do not spend as much time on reading instruction as other nations (Foertsch, 1997). It is likely that classroom teachers would spend more time teaching

reading if the hectic school schedule permitted (Foertsch, 1997). According to Raphael and McMahon (1994), the issue of time spent on reading instruction came to light in the 1970s and 1980s, when it was realized how little time students were actually engaged in the reading process. Further, Foertsch's (1997) research shows a direct correlation between larger blocks of time spent on reading instruction and higher reading performance. Lastly, although District X guidelines mandate 153 minutes of language arts instruction per day, reality does not allow this. After deducting time for math, writing, science, social studies, and fine arts and physical education, only 60 minutes remain for reading instruction.

Time does not always have to be seen as a problem. Possibly, the real issue is not a lack of time, but rather how the allotted time is spent. Perhaps there is simply a need to more effectively train teachers to incorporate comprehension skills and strategies within the time they currently have.

Lack of Teacher Training / Effectiveness

The third cause identified by the research was lack of teacher training and effectiveness. In Foertsch's (1997) study of exemplary reading programs, she makes a connection between good reading instruction and the number of days teachers spent in formal inservice programs that focused on reading instruction. Unfortunately, many districts do not offer enough formal inservice programs or time to process the newly acquired information. District X is no exception to this shortcoming. The district provides multiple opportunities for the introduction of new strategies, but falls short in meeting its goals by not holding teachers accountable for the implementation of these strategies. The fact that many teachers in District X have not left their "comfort zone" and are still teaching the way they did 20 years ago suggests that these teachers have not received enough inservice. Canterford (1991) also recognizes that teacher-centered instruction is not an effective way for students

to learn, however, there are still teachers who have not converted to a child-centered approach. Canterford's research reflects that the problem is common to other districts as well. Teachers are not the only ones who lack skills and strategies. The students also need to improve upon mastering their skills and reading strategies.

Lack of Skills and Strategies Used by Students

Another possible cause of poor reading comprehension is lack of skills and strategies on the part of the students. This problem became evident when reading inventories were completed (Appendix C). Although District X inservices its teachers on a regular basis, its students are still unable to apply these strategies on their own. Ninety percent of the 44 students in the study show inadequate evidence of independently applying the strategies necessary for improved comprehension on a regular basis.

A problem with comprehension was noticed by the researchers and other teachers currently teaching at site A. Upon closer examination of the problem, the following possible causes were noted: changing demographics, teaching time constraints, lack of teacher training and effectiveness, and lack of skills and strategies used by students. Each of these causes have been thoroughly discussed in this chapter. Several common threads leading to improved reading comprehension were revealed in the literature and thus, Chapter 3 discusses the solutions developed in this project.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

Improving student performance in reading is a concern for everyone in education. Research shows a steady decline in student achievement in reading (Dr. Lauren May, personal communication, September 1997).

Most teachers share a common goal of working toward improving reading comprehension and increasing motivation among their students. In order to accomplish these goals, they utilize several strategies and concepts. Some of the concepts/strategies are: teaching students to make predictions and connections, engaging students in literature discussions, using novels and quality literature in reading programs, having students respond and reflect upon literature, reading aloud to students, combining old and new practices and encouraging the use of higher level thinking skills.

Teaching Students to Make Connections and Predictions

The first strategy, teaching students to make connections and predictions, has been researched by many. Noden and Moss (1994) discuss the importance of making connections between literature and life. They see this form of response as one that will ensure unique and meaningful discussions, as well as create focused readers. Flood and Lapp (1994) also discuss the use of connections to improve comprehension. With a slightly different focus, their study describes the use of connections prior to reading in order to improve understanding of difficult text or

concepts. Piaget (as cited in Kelly, 1990) recognized the importance of making connections. The strategy of connecting allows students to become actively involved as they respond to literature. This involvement allows students to construct their own meaning, which in turn leads to deeper comprehension (Kelly, 1990). The other component of this solution, making predictions, was discussed by Harp (1989). He sees prediction as a major component in the comprehension process. According to Harp (1989), comprehension revolves around the ability to answer questions. What better questions can students answer than those they have generated themselves? Another form of instruction where students can formulate and answer their own questions is during literature discussions.

Engaging Students In Literature Discussions

The second strategy to improve comprehension is engaging students in thoughtful literature discussions. Literature discussions offer students an opportunity to be exposed to multiple perspectives, enhance their literary thinking (Lehman & Scharer, 1996) and increase their comprehension (Noden & Moss, 1994). Harp (1989) discusses the importance of the teacher's role in these literature discussions. After carefully studying a teacher who routinely participates as a member and not as a leader, Harp (1989) concluded that comprehension takes place naturally. When discussions are driven by students, their understanding is deeper and more meaningful (Harp, 1989). In addition, the social interaction provided by literature discussions creates more eager readers (Au & Scheu, 1989). These eager readers are also improving their metacognitive skills as they are forced to formulate and defend an opinion. Talking about that opinion allows students the opportunity to grow cognitively. Oral language development also thrives during literature discussions.

Language development takes place naturally as children converse with each other. Additionally, literature discussions may be one of the few times students feel

free to talk about their thoughts, feelings and insights (Strickland, Dillon, Funkhouser, Glick, & Rodgers, 1989). In summary, Koskinen (1995) found in his research "... that literature discussion groups hold great promise as tools for both students and teachers to converse about literature, to develop a love of literature, and to develop strategies for understanding literature" (p. 723). Another effective strategy to enable students to better understand literature is the use of higher level questions.

Using Higher Level Thinking Skills

Lehman and Scharer (1996) note the importance of using higher level questions as opposed to "boring" or shallow questions that are, according Noden and Moss (1994), all too often relied upon by teachers. Higher level thinking skills such as inferring, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating are all valuable cognitive skills. These skills will enable students to become independent thinkers who can positively contribute to society. The use of these strategies is especially beneficial when they are used in conjunction with quality literature and are interwoven before, during and after reading (Noden & Moss, 1994).

Using Novels and Quality Literature

Flood and Lapp (1994) note the importance of selecting quality literature. They also state that students have more to gain from books that focus on multiple topics and contain many different perspectives. Keegan and Shrake (1991) agree that quality literature enhances any reading program. Furthermore, they note that when students are given the freedom to select a novel of their choice, enthusiasm and excitement to read are greatly increased (Keegan & Shrake, 1991). This was very apparent when compared to the excitement levels present when only teacher selected materials were used. Obviously, at times it is necessary to use teacher selected materials, however, it is also important to offer the opportunity for student self-selection regularly (Keegan & Shrake, 1991). A vast collection of excellent

literature in the classroom will facilitate this freedom while insuring that quality literature is being read. Another way to expose students to quality literature is by reading aloud to them.

Reading Aloud to Students

"Reading aloud to children stimulates their interest and imagination, as well as their emotional development and language use (Trelease, as cited in Kelly, 1990, p. 464). Read aloud time also offers great opportunities for teachers to informally teach strategies while providing a quality model for students. Many students enjoy the relaxing atmosphere created by a classroom read-aloud. Enjoying literature together can increase student motivation. For some, it may offer the only opportunity to absorb the story without the burden of decoding (Kelly, 1990). Another opportunity students have to interact with literature in a non-threatening manner is through responding and/or reflecting with their peers.

Responding and Reflecting Upon Literature

Teachers, administrators and parents alike are beginning to see the importance of allowing students the opportunity to actively respond to literature. This can be accomplished through written and oral reflection (Kelly, 1990; Strickland, et. al, 1989). After reading a novel of their choice students are given the opportunity to respond to literature in their reading log. When responding in writing, students can write about their favorite part of the book, something that was confusing to them, how well they liked or disliked the story and why, or simply write a letter to a character from the story. When asked to respond orally, students are usually in small groups. Each group guides their own discussion by creating higher order thinking questions, or they respond to open ended questions posed by the teacher. Student generated higher order questions offer opportunities to connect reading and writing.

Writing and Reading Connection

Writing about reading provides the perfect arena for students to reflect individually regardless of their reading level. The opportunity to connect with literature personalizes reading as each student's interpretation is individualized due to the different life experiences they bring with them (Kelly, 1990). Within the safety of their journals, students are free to sort out their thoughts in a non-threatening atmosphere. Because of the safe environment, students can become more emotionally involved and increase the amount of expression they use. Regular opportunities for journal reflection lead to dramatic improvements in the reflection process (Kelly, 1990). Specifically, students show an increase in fluency, an awareness to and inclusion of detail, and make mechanical improvements such as fewer errors in sentence structure and spelling (Kelly, 1990). Because of the interconnectedness of reading and writing, more writing about literature will lead to better reading and more reading of quality literature will lead to better writing. Traditional reading instruction did not recognize writing as a vital component of successful reading.

Combining Old and New Practices

For several years there has been great controversy as to how an effective reading program should be designed and implemented. Some believe traditional methods are the only way for students to learn the "basics" of reading. Current research, however, shows there are other effective ways to impart reading knowledge and skills. A closer examination of these two philosophies follows.

"Early beliefs about reading instruction were based on defining reading as a process of getting meaning from the printed page. Not surprisingly, instruction emphasized decoding the print, assuming that decoded print would automatically be understood" (Raphael & McMahon, 1994, p. 103). Along with decoding,

traditional reading programs focused on drill and practice. This instruction emphasized finding the main idea, sequencing events and determining cause and effect (Flood & Lapp, 1994). Although these are valuable skills, it is the method of instruction that is being scrutinized. Often, instruction took the form of students reading an assigned story and answering questions that required little thinking. Most reading programs were teacher-centered, where students "assumed that participation required them to interpret what the teacher said, to respond suitably, and to make a contribution of their own of a sort, and at a time, that teachers recognized as appropriate" (Willes, as cited in Canterford, 1991, p. 287).

The other major philosophy that is presently driving reading instruction is based on the belief that literacy is acquired through use (Harp, 1989). This theory stresses the importance of making predictions and connections, discussing literature using higher level thinking skills and quality literature, responding and reflecting upon literature, connecting reading and writing, self-selecting reading materials, participating in SSR (sustained silent reading) and being read aloud to often (Flood & Lapp, 1994; Kelly, 1990; Harp, 1989; Noden & Moss, 1994). In short, this theory incorporates all of the solutions that have been previously discussed in this paper. The major difference between the old and new philosophy is in the delivery. The second philosophy revolves around the idea of teachers as facilitators, while more traditional programs are teacher-centered.

Solution Chosen for This Project

Current research shows that discussing literature improves comprehension and student motivation, therefore this project's focus is to implement discussion groups. Within this context, students will learn the important strategies of predicting, connecting, responding, and how to use other higher level thinking skills. Discussion groups will be student-led and will revolve around quality

literature. This theory was chosen for the project in question because it combines important aspects from all the aforementioned solutions for sound reading instruction.

Project Objective and Processes

As a result of increased opportunities for students to actively discuss literature during the period of September, 1997 to December, 1997, the fourth grade students from the targeted classes will increase their motivation and comprehension.

In order to accomplish the terminal objectives, the following processes are necessary:

1. Develop a list of quality literatures.
2. Develop and distribute parent surveys.
3. Develop surveys that will help to determine the students' level of motivation prior to and at the conclusion of our study.
4. Develop and engage in discussions that encourage higher level thinking.
5. Develop and administer teacher made tests.
6. Select stories to be used for comprehension assessment.
7. Administer a comprehension test prior to and at the conclusion of the study.
8. Compile and analyze data from surveys and tests.

Project Action Plan

I. September, 1997

A. Pre-Project Student Survey on Motivation

1. Distribute to students
2. Collect surveys and record results
3. Compile and graph data

B. Pre-Project Parent Survey

1. Distribute to students
2. Collect surveys and record results
3. Compile and graph data

C. Pre-Project Comprehension Exam

1. Administer test to students
2. Collect tests and record scores

D. Novel One - There's A Boy in the Girls' Bathroom

1. Read novel (guided reading, independent reading, etc.)
2. Ongoing class discussions
   a. whole class - modeling
   b. small group

E. Teacher Made Test

1. Administer test
2. Correct test, record data

II. October, 1997

A. Novel Two

1. Read novel (guided reading, independent reading, etc.)
2. Ongoing class discussions

B. Teacher Made Test

1. Administer test
2. Correct test, record data

C. Basal test without discussion

1. Administer test
2. Correct test, record data

D. Basal test with discussion

1. Administer test
2. Correct test, record data

E. Informal Student Survey on Motivation

1. Survey students
2. Record results
3. Compile and graph data

III. November, 1997

A. Novel Three - Roald Dahl Author Study

1. Read novels (guided reading, independent reading, etc.)
2. Ongoing class discussions

B. Teacher Made Test

1. Administer test
2. Correct test, record data

IV. December, 1997

A. Post-Project Student Survey on Motivation

1. Distribute to students
2. Collect surveys and record results
3. Compile and graph data

B. Post-Project parent survey

1. Distribute
2. Collect surveys, compile and graph data

C. Post-Project Comprehension Test

1. Administer test
2. Collect test and record scores

D. Basal test without discussion

1. Administer test
2. Correct test, record data

E. Basal test with discussion

1. Administer test
2. Correct test, record data

F. Analysis of data

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of the intervention, parent and student surveys will be used. The surveys will be distributed to students and parents in early September, 1997 and again in December, 1997. The goal of this assessment is to determine motivation and attitude toward reading prior to and at the conclusion of the study. Additionally, informal surveys, teacher made tests, comprehension tests, and basal questions will be administered and analyzed.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The purpose of this project was to increase student motivation and comprehension through literature discussions. The action plan began in September with pre-project surveys being completed by all 44 fourth grade students and at least one of their parents. Secondly, a pre-project comprehension exam was administered to students. The third phase of the project that was implemented in September was to begin reading an appropriate novel. During the reading of this novel, several reading strategies were utilized. Students were introduced to small group and whole class discussions. Although recording student discussions was not part of the original plan, it was noticed that the discussions were of such high quality that recordings were made. The recordings were used as models and provided students opportunities for self and group reflection. In accordance with the action plan, after each novel was concluded, all students completed a teacher made test. This test was designed to assess comprehension and several other reading skills which necessitated higher level thinking.

As the school year progressed, a second novel was introduced. As with the first novel, class discussions were continued. At the conclusion of the novel another teacher made test was given. In October, benchmark data were collected through the use of a basal text. Students were asked to independently read a short story and answer the five comprehension questions that followed. The following

week, the process was repeated with the exception of a lengthy student discussion inserted between the reading of the story and the answering of the questions. In addition to these October assessments, students were informally surveyed to assess motivation. These informal surveys took the form of activities such as graph making, journal writing, and small group discussions.

In November, a third and final novel was read by the students. While reading this novel, students engaged in small group discussions on a daily basis. Upon completion of the novel and group discussions, all students took a final teacher made test.

In December, the 44 students and their parents were again asked to complete a survey on student motivation. Students were also given the post-project comprehension test. The final component of the benchmark data was a second set of basal stories and questions. One story was accompanied by group discussion prior to answering the end of the story questions. The second story was read and questions were completed independently.

Although the action plan was followed without deviation, adjustments were made to the ways in which some data were used. For example, although the teacher made tests were administered, the results were used strictly for additional student assessment. This information enabled the teacher to gain more insight into each student's reading behaviors. The contributing factor which led to the decision to delete the data obtained from these assessments was a lack of consistency when comparing one novel to another. Attempting to compare two novels created too many factors which could lead to skewed results. Specific items of concern were: level of interest, level of reading difficulty, and length of the novel. It was felt that using basal stories met the original data collection goals and also allowed for increased consistency which led to more valid comparisons. The data was then analyzed.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

Results were collected in the form of student and parent surveys which assessed the students' attitudes about reading. Further information was gained from teacher observations and comprehension tests.

Student Surveys

Data collected from student surveys showed that student attitudes about reading and reading related behaviors were more positive by the end of the study than the attitudes present when the program was initiated. Figures 3 - 8 display these results and the graphs enable the reader to see significant gains made during the three month period.

Figure 3 showed that by December more students were excited to go the the library. This behavior displayed itself in the childrens' eagerness to make frequent trips to the school library. At a glance, Figure 4 indicates that once students had a well-chosen library book they were more inclined to spend some of their free time during school engaged in reading. Figure 5 reveals that overall feelings toward reading were also positively affected. Viewing Figure 6 allows one to see that the positive attitude toward reading included the reading of text books.

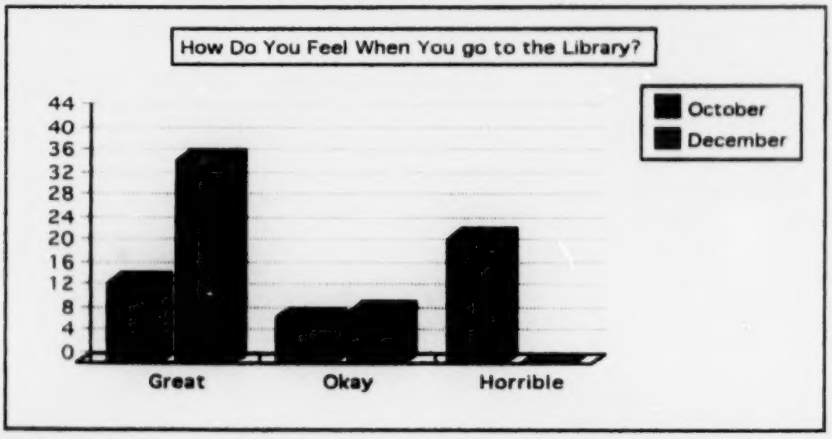

Figure 3. Student Survey - Question One. Student feelings about going to the library changed for the better from October to December.

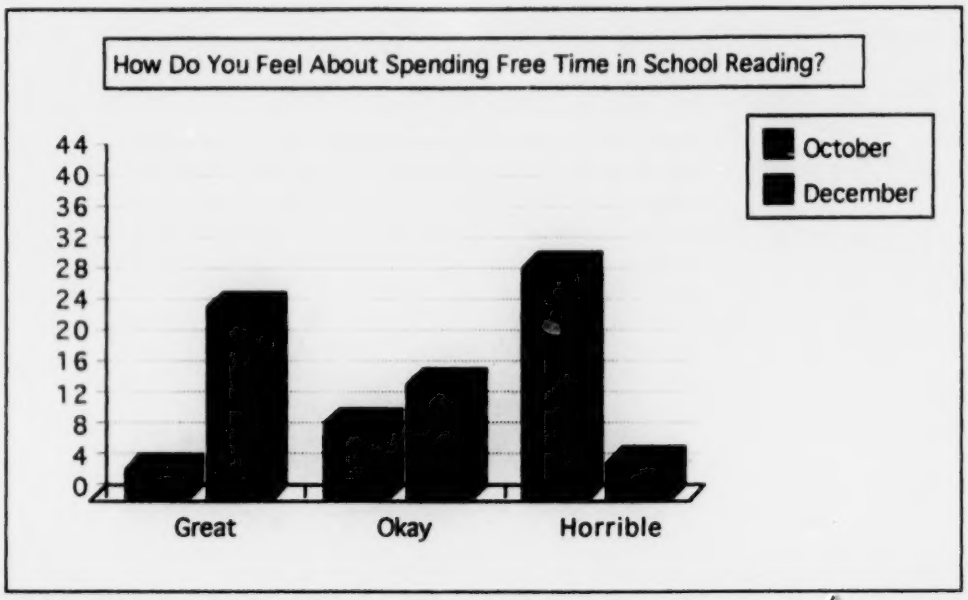

Figure 4. Student Survey - Question Two. Student attitudes about reading at school during free time drastically improved from October to December.

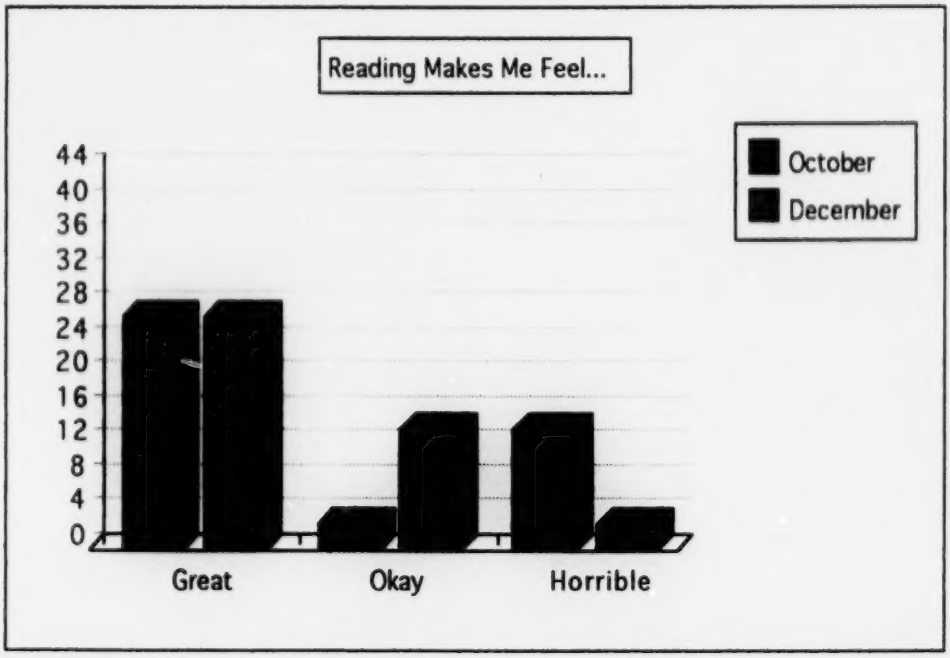

Figure 5. Student Survey - Question Three. Student feelings about reading had mixed implications. While the number of students who felt great about reading remained constant, the number of students who initially felt horrible about reading decreased considerably.

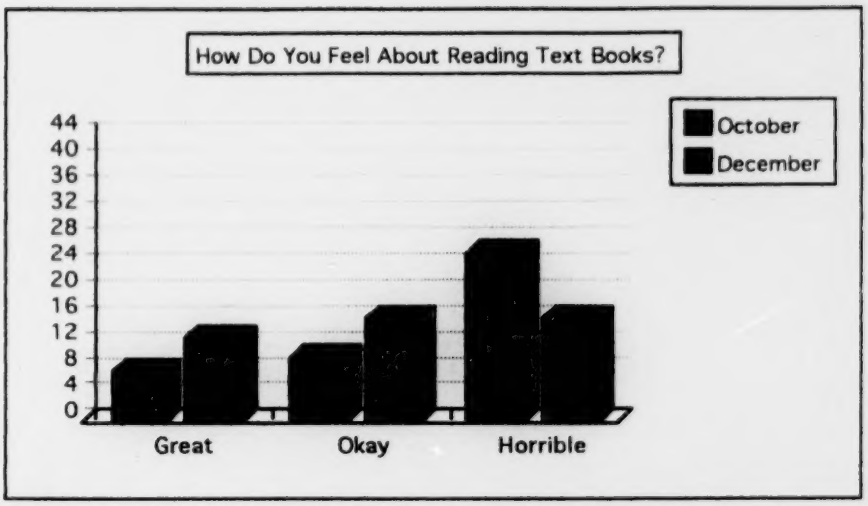

Figure 6. Student Survey - Question Four. Students attitudes toward reading text books improved moderately from October to December.

As one would expect, when it came to choosing books over more trendy gifts, or choosing reading over playing, children had a more difficult time committing to reading. Figures 7 and 8 display this information. Even though there were not huge gains made in the "great" column, the students replying "okay" increased while students who replied negatively declined.

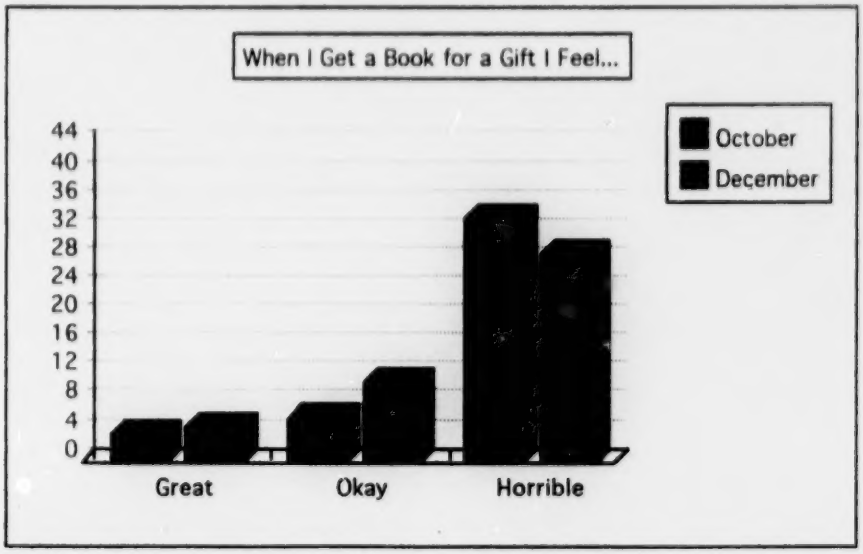

Figure 7. Student Survey - Question Five. Student attitudes changed only slightly when asked how they felt about receiving a book for a gift.

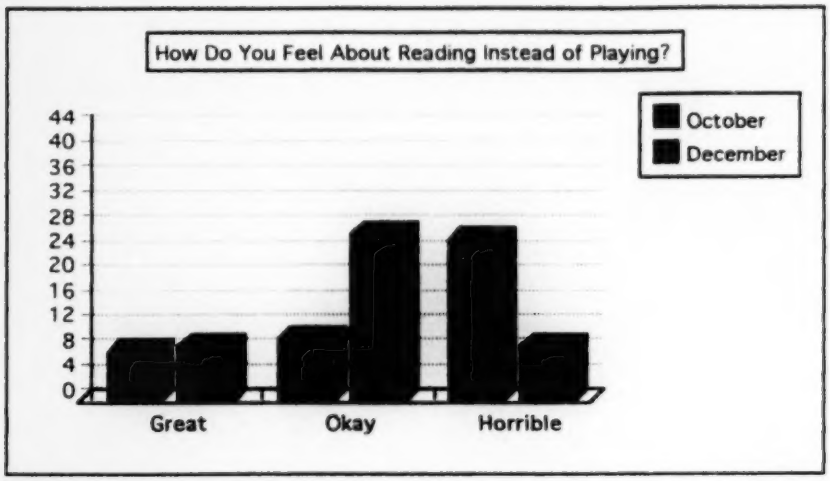

Figure 8. Student Survey - Question Six. The results show a positive impact on student attitude toward reading instead of playing.

Both student and parent survey results support the theory that discussing literature increases positive reading behaviors.

Parent Surveys

The following information pertains to Figures 9 - 13 which represents data gathered from parent surveys. Again, a positive trend can be noted. At the onset of the research project, some students were identified by their parents to have positive reading behaviors already in place. As the three month project progressed, students who initially did not show positive behaviors began to emulate their already motivated counterparts. The highly motivated readers of September remained highly motivated in December. When compared to the observations made within each fourth grade classroom, it seemed that parents were quite generous as they recorded their student's reading behaviors. In September there was a large discrepancy between parent opinion and the actual behaviors students displayed in the classroom. At the conclusion of the research, reading behaviors demonstrated in the classroom more closely reflected December survey results. From these various surveys it is evident that reading attitudes of the students improved overall.

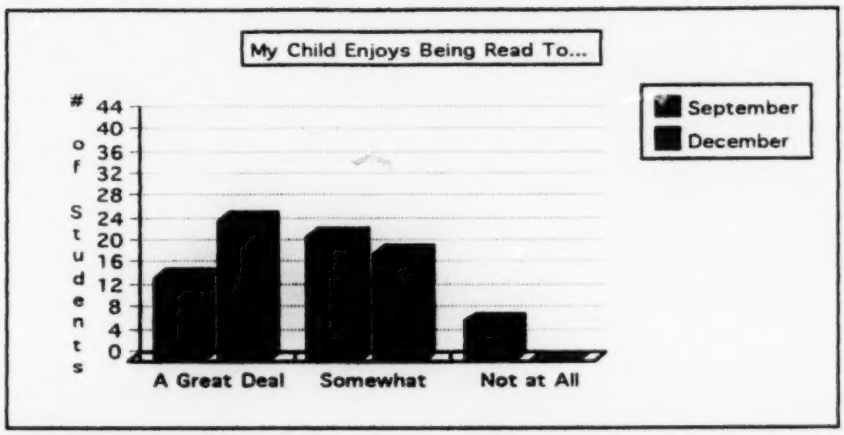

Figure 9. Parent Survey - Question One. Favorable results were gathered from a comparison of September to December responses.

Figure 9 shows that by December there were no students who didn't enjoy being read to and the number of those who enjoyed it only somewhat declined. The number of students who enjoyed being read to a great deal nearly doubled. Figure 10 shows that parents noticed an increase in the number of times their child initiated discussions about books at home. This survey information shows that many children transferred what they learned about discussion to authentic situations outside of the classroom. Figure 11 clearly shows that parents recognized the importance of this reading behavior in September as well as in December.

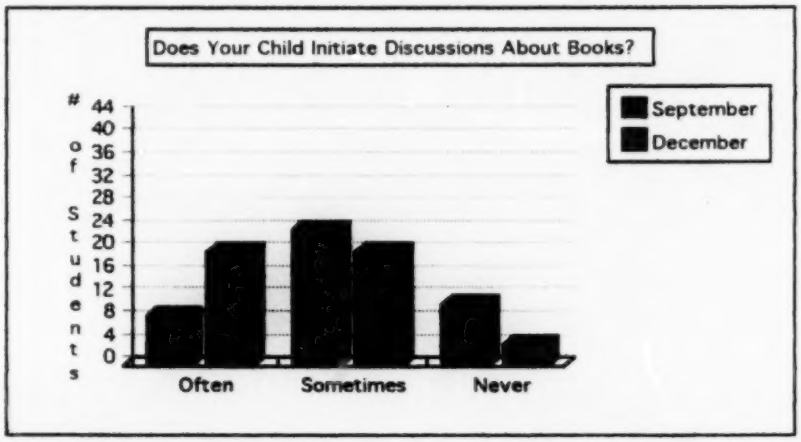

Figure 10. Parent Survey - Question Two. It is clear that by December more students initiated discussions about books.

As displayed in Figure 12, dramatic changes occurred in the number of students who were highly motivated to read. The number of students who were not motivated to read at all decreased greatly while the number of students who were somewhat motivated to read remained relatively constant. According to parents, the number of children who never understood what they read dropped from six to zero. Figure 13 shows that these students now comprehend what they read sometimes. There were also significant gains made in reading comprehension.

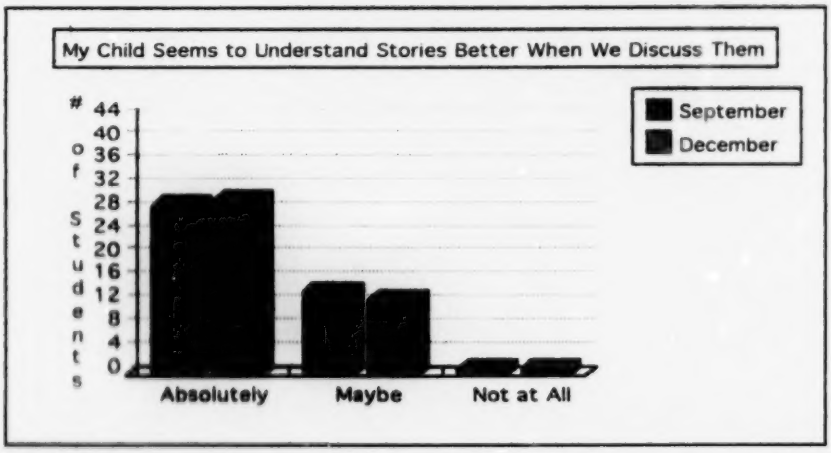

Figure 11. Parent Survey - Question Three. Not much change was indicated by the parents' responses to this question.

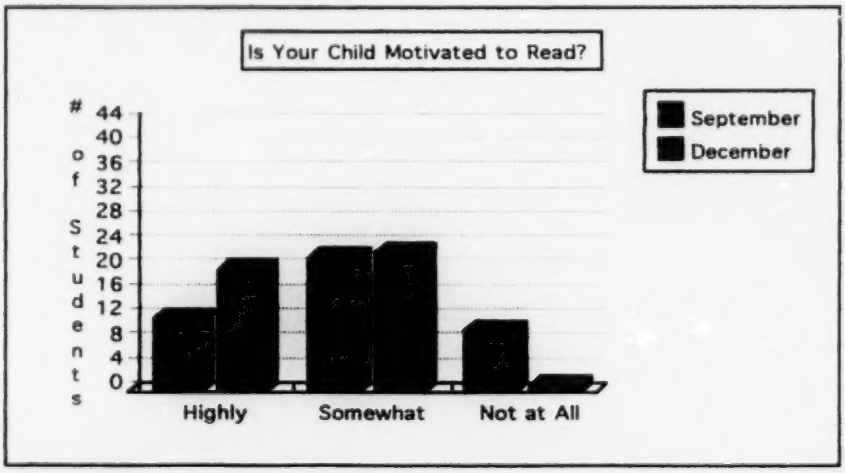

Figure 12. Parent Survey - Question Four. Children were more motivated to read in December than in September.

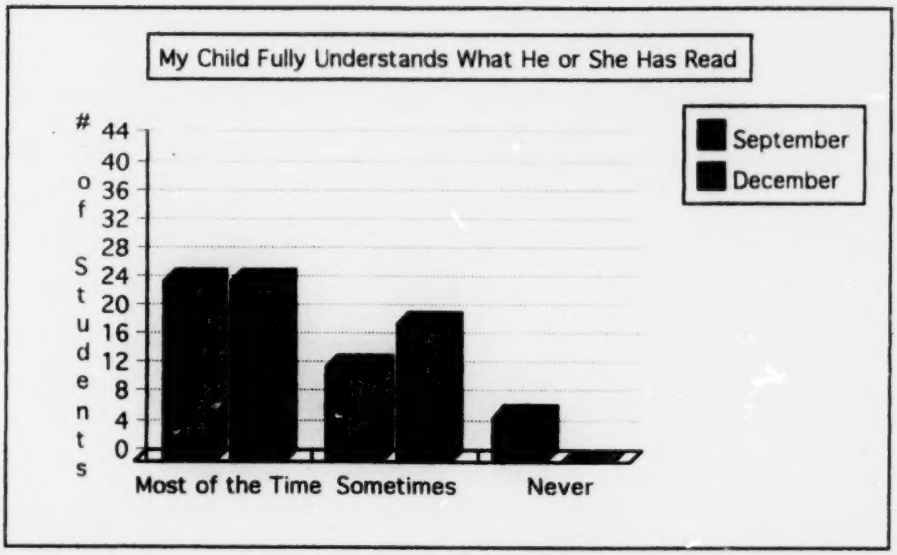

Figure 13. Parent Survey - Question Five. By December more students understood what they were reading.

Test Results

Viewing Figure 14 clearly shows marked increase in the number of students earning scores in the 80 - 100% range. To compliment this increase there was a large decline in the number of students earning scores less than 59%.

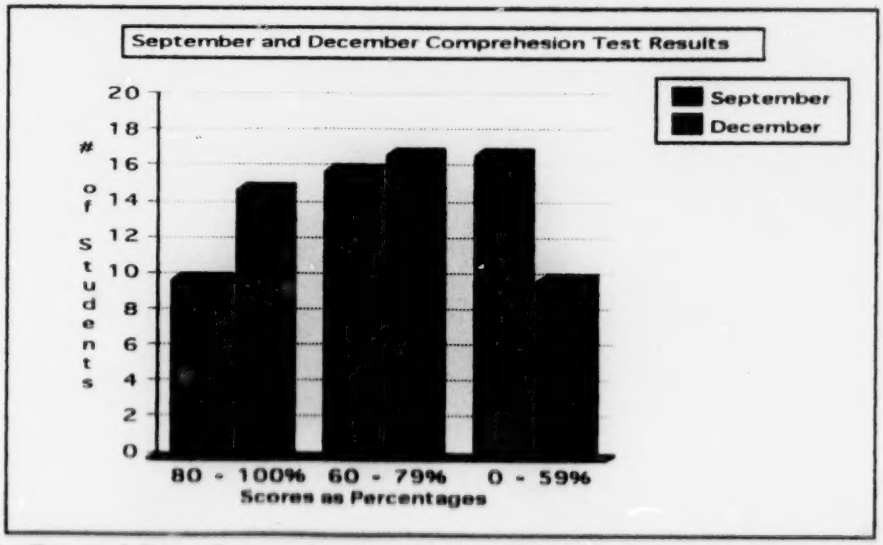

Figure 14. Pre and Post Comprehension Test. Clearly more students achieved passing grades on the post comprehension test administered in December.

To further facilitate comparison between September and December performance, the average test scores were computed. The average score on the basic comprehension test given in September was 58% while the average score on the basic comprehension test administered in December was 75%. These figures represent a 17% improvement in student scores.

The other method of comprehension assessment was in the form of a basal test. The tests were administered in October and again in December. Each month students were asked to read a story and answer the questions. After reading the first story, students were instructed to complete the assignment individually with no discussion. After reading the second story, students participated in peer discussions and then answered the questions. Results were averaged for easy viewing (see Figures 15 and 16). Drastic differences in test scores represent better understanding of the story thus lending credibility to the theory that discussion of literature leads to increased comprehension. Both graphs demonstrate that student comprehension was greater with discussion than without it.

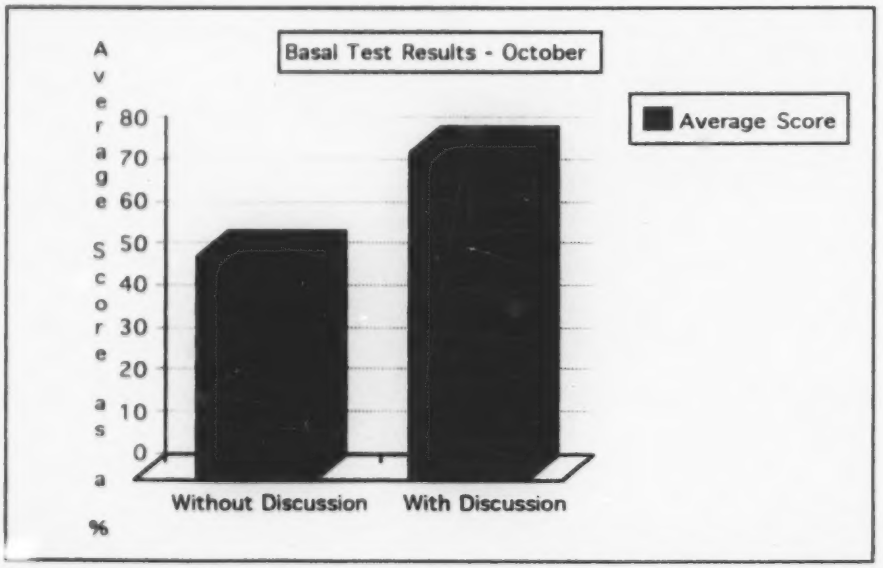

Figure 15. October Basal Test Results. The graph shows an increase of about 25% in the class average.

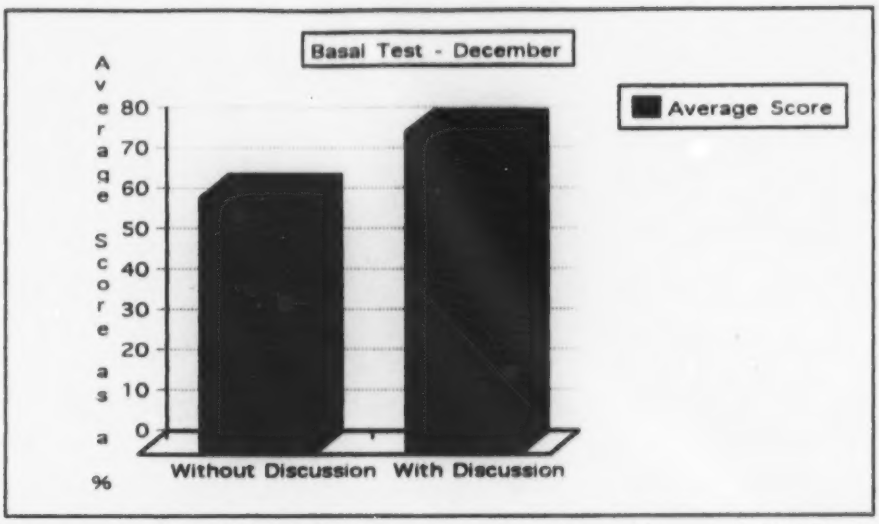

Figure 16. December Basal Test Results. It is clear from this graph that in December students still benefited from discussing literature with their peers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

According to the results gathered from the basic comprehension test and the surveys, it is evident that discussion helped to improve comprehension and motivation. Therefore, literature discussions should be an integral component of every sound reading program. In addition to improved comprehension and motivation, several other benefits were noted during the implementation of this project. Two of those extra benefits included improved social skills and increased use of higher level thinking skills by the students. Students were trained in the use of several social skills which added to the success of the literature discussions and subsequently, helped prepare the children for future interactions with peers in their adult life. The students were trained to listen and respond to each other, to take turns, to monitor volume and to keep discussions on task and focused. Each skill was introduced and practiced independently to allow for mastery through daily use. Continual participation in discussions allowed students to really listen and respond to each other. Responding to other students forced all members of the group to

continually evaluate and reflect upon their own perceptions of the literature. As students were required to defend their positions and opinions they were naturally using higher level thinking skills. Students also benefited from the opportunity to hear other perspectives and points of view. This allowed them to reflect critically upon their own ideas, respond to others and even revise their initial perceptions. This process encouraged open-mindedness and showed that there are multiple solutions to every problem. It allowed students to make connections to their personal lives and allowed for more than adequate opportunity to share these connections with their peers. Through discussion, confusing parts of the novel were were clarified.

Literature discussions also provided many benefits for the teachers. First and foremost, both teachers involved in the action research project found it rewarding to see such remarkable gains and high levels of discussion by all students. Planning for the implementation of this program required much attention to detail at first, but once off the ground, the students really ran their own program. In the beginning, students participated in whole class discussions. This allowed the teachers to model and teach simultaneously. During these whole class discussions, students learned how to politely interject their ideas and how to establish a speaker by using non-verbal cues. Thus, the teacher was continually modeling the desired behaviors while participating as a group member. Authentic assessment is important because it is transferable and it emulates how students will later be evaluated in the adult world. Literature discussions also lend themselves to authentic assessment (ongoing evaluations of the students' understanding and participation). With such remarkable benefits one might begin to wonder, at what expense do we gain these "prizes" - in short, what are the drawbacks?

Surprisingly, these researches did not encounter many overt drawbacks.

Upon deeper reflection, a few minor hindrances came to mind. First, an uncooperative student may impede the success of group discussions. Most problems associated with group dynamics can be remedied with minor adjustments. For example, we deviated from our original action plan to encourage full participation by all group members. In order to better monitor group dynamics, student discussions were recorded. Recordings were then used for self-reflection as well as for teacher evaluation. Secondly, some teachers might find such a high level of student interaction difficult to manage, however, we found that students were interested in their own contributions and therefore, behavior was not a problem. Another drawback that could be anticipated is the difficulty associated with meeting required curriculum demands. For instance, quality discussions take time and can be placed in competition with other important components of a well-balanced reading program. Creative planning that integrates reading strategies into other content areas can help eliminate some of the problems associated with lack of time. Selective abandonment of lower level drill and practice seat work can also free up time to be used for discussions which foster higher level thinking.

With so few drawbacks, it would be a shame for teachers not to take advantage of this successful strategy. The discussions build on the natural ability and interests of students and can easily become part of any reading program. Even first grade students can participate to some degree in discussions of the literature they are reading. Middle school students already discuss movies on a regular basis, making the extension to novels would be an easy transition. The program not only builds on student interests, but could also be appealing to school districts concerned with cost effectiveness. Little, if any training, is needed and the only expense would be for tape recorders, should the teacher choose to use them. What school district would not want to employ a low cost program that easily fits into any curriculum

and produces such impressive results?

School districts are already keenly aware that there are many attractive deterrents to reading (Nintendo, computers, television, movies, sports, etc.). The world is constantly faced with the tremendous task of competing with these novel attractions while attempting to cultivate future readers. Connecting reading with the opportunity to talk to friends is motivating to students and adults alike and provides a natural springboard to keep them engaged in reading. Since comprehension is an essential skill for preserving a democratic society, it is the opinion of these researchers that discussion groups need to be an integral component of every well-balanced reading program.

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APPENDIX A

PARENT SURVEY

September 12, 1997

Dear Parents,

This year as part of the fourth grade reading curriculum, your child will learn how to participate in literature discussions. The goal of these discussions is to improve overall reading performance and motivation.

Mary Brandt and Kristi Isaacson, two teachers at Johnson School, are currently studying new ways to increase student comprehension and motivation as part of a master's program. One of the strategies they have chosen to research in-depth is literature discussion groups. Because discussing literature is already a large component of the District #2 reading program your child will be participating in class discussions and comprehension skills on a regular basis. We are asking your permission to chart the classes' progress. All the information gathered will be kept in strict confidence. No names will be used. If you prefer that your child not be a part of this study, please fill out and return the bottom portion of this letter.

Thank you for your cooperation,

The Fourth Grade Team

---

* Please do not include my child's data in your research project.

Parent Signature: _____

Student's Name: _____

PARENT SURVEY

1. Is your child motivated (excited) to read?

   highly somewhat not at all

2. My child enjoys being read to ...

   a great deal somewhat not at all

3. Does your child initiate discussion about books they are reading?

   often sometimes never

4. My child seems to understand stories better when we discuss them.

   absolutely maybe not at all

5. My child fully understand what he/she has read.

   most of the time sometimes never

6. My child's greatest problem in reading is _____ .

Thank You for your time and effort. It is greatly appreciated.

APPENDIX B

STUDENT SURVEY

STUDENT SURVEY

1. Reading makes me feel...

2. When I get a book for a gift I feel...

3. How do you feel about reading instead of playing?

4. How do you feel when you go to the library to checkout a book?

5. How do you feel about reading text books?

6. How do you feel about spending free time in school reading?

Name _____

APPENDIX C

READING INVENTORY

Fluent Reader

Name _____ **Date** _____

Look what I can do	not yet	some-times	always
Can identify the main idea and key information in a book.			
Can summarize key points.			
Can make inferences.			
Describe how texts are written in different ways (informational, mystery story, fairy tale etc.)			
Identify ways authors have used language to show that something is important, funny, sad, etc.			
Tell when an author is trying to persuade me.			
Able to choose texts or resources about a topic.			
Able to locate information within a text that answers a specific question.			
Can generate higher order type questions about a story.			
Recognizes when another resource is needed to make sense of the text.			
Re-read and/or read-on to make sense of a passage I don't understand.			
Able to make a prediction about the meaning of an unknown word by how it is used in the text.			
Use my knowledge of how a non-fiction text is constructed to help me understand them -opening sentence, section headings			
Can make appropriate predictions and can defend my idea.			
Can make connections between a story I've read and other stories or personal experiences.			
Can read with expression.			
Understand that I read different texts in different ways (a difficult text slowly, poetry with feeling etc.)			
Can apply punctuation while reading.			
Re-read and/or read-on to make sense of a passage I don't understand.			
Know when I am unable to understand something and ask for help.			

Fluent Reader Cont.

Name _____ **Date** _____

Look what I can do	not yet	some-times	always
Recommend books I've enjoyed to my classmates.			
Visualize events and characters.			
Read multiple books by the same author.			
Read books from a favorite genre.			
Explain why I did or didn't enjoy a book.			